

Everything [in] between – Mercy and Righteousness

Psalm 126 • Luke 19: 1-10

Fifth Sunday in Lent • April 6, 2025

by Pat Berger

Some of you will remember, either from when you were a young child in church school or from teaching young children in church school, the lovely little song about Zacchaeus: (no, I am not going to sing . . .) “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see.” When Jesus got to that tree, he looked up, saw Zacchaeus and told him to come down, because he (Jesus) wanted to stay at Zacchaeus’ home that night and to have dinner with him.

That got Zacchaeus out of the tree in a hurry! It also caused much grumbling from the others who were in the crowd to see and hear Jesus. Jesus had just invited himself to be the guest of one they thought of as a sinner. Tax collectors at that time were thought of as the worst of the worst; one writer said that tax collectors were “loathed.” They colluded with the government, took advantage of their neighbors and friends, amassed great wealth for themselves. Zacchaeus had worked himself well into that classification. He was not just a tax collector; he was a chief tax collector.

One of our words for today is righteous, and likely most in the crowd thought of themselves as being righteous, being right with God, following God’s standards. They certainly would not have thought of Zacchaeus in that way. They had come to see Jesus and to learn from him, to hear more about God and about – well, about being righteous. To be “righteous” means to be right with God. It has to do

with both a person's relationship with God and with how a person acts. Those in the crowd that day may, indeed, have thought they were in right relationship with God, AND they were certainly not acting that way toward Zacchaeus.

Jesus, on the other hand, was, of course, acting righteously and with mercy, and mercy is our other word for this day. Mercy has to do with showing compassion and kindness to another, whether or not the other has earned it, and maybe especially when the other has not earned it. And also especially when the other is under one's power. We wonder why they didn't get it – and we have to wonder at ourselves, also, all of these years and experiences later.

So Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." Zacchaeus hurried all right. And notice this: Jesus didn't give Zacchaeus a bad time about what he had done with his life. No, "you ought not to have collected more taxes than were due," and no, "you must not be a tax collector any more," – none of that. Just, in verse 8, we hear Zacchaeus say, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." All was made right with God and with Zacchaeus' neighbors. We can imagine Jesus saying, "This is why I have come," heaving a sigh of relief, and the two of them heading for Zacchaeus' house.

What about us? How do mercy and righteousness work in our lives and in those of the ones around us? Do we manage most of the time to act with mercy when we are around others, whether or not we agree with them? Mercy is the word that has to do with compassion and kindness. As I was finishing this up yesterday, my niece stopped by on her way back from the rally in downtown Hillsboro, and she said

she had been really impressed: everyone was behaving really well! They were listening to speakers, cheering appropriately, and most of the signs were fun to read. I haven't heard about all of the other rallies yet, and I hope they went as well. Just as in Jesus' time, we aren't always going to agree with each other, AND we can work at acting with mercy in any case.

We can work at being right with God, righteous. It won't always work out that way – we are, after all, only people. No doubt each of us has at least one story we could share – and no, I am not going to ask us to do that – one story we could share about a time or an incident when we wish that we had represented the Kingdom better. Even hearing the story of Zacchaeus can make us come up with a judgement of him. It can make us come up with a judgement of the crowd following Jesus!

I was reading an editorial in Presbyterian Outlook magazine, written by Teri McDowell Ott, who is one of the authors of our Lent study. She quoted a piece of a poem by Yehuda Amichai. The poem is called "The Place Where We Are Right." He wrote, "From the place where we are right/Flowers will never grow/in the spring." She was writing about our tendency to think that those with whom we disagree are . . . well, are wrong. Maybe they are. And maybe if we ask questions that are more open and inviting, we will be surprised at what we learn. She writes, "The place where we are right is too hard for flowers to break through the soil. The place where we are right kills possibilities and potential." When we work at being righteous before God and merciful with those around us, it makes for soft, fertile soil. Spring flowers can bloom.

Let us pray.